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Balancing quality and well-being: a study on the impact of quality assurance measures on burnout among EFL teachers in Vietnam

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Introduction: This qualitative study investigates the impact of quality assurance (QA) measures on the well-being and professional satisfaction of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Vietnam, focusing on the manifestations of burnout as a direct consequence of these pressures.

Methods: Employing a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 Vietnamese EFL teachers from two educational institutions, exploring their experiences with QA initiatives. Thematic analysis revealed a dual burden: the intensified administrative responsibilities and heightened student expectations associated with QA processes contribute significantly to stress and burnout among teachers.

Results/Findings: Key findings include the emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment experienced by participants, alongside physical symptoms and mental health challenges. Teachers reported employing various coping strategies to navigate the pressures of their professional environment, highlighting their quest for professional fulfillment amidst these challenges.

Discussion: The study underscores the need for a balanced approach to QA that considers teacher well-being, advocating for policies that alleviate administrative burdens, promote work-life balance, and support professional development. Additionally, it calls for institutional prioritization of mental health resources and collaborative environments to mitigate the adverse effects of QA on teachers. The findings contribute to the discourse on QA in higher education, emphasizing the importance of supporting EFL teachers' well-being for sustainable educational excellence.

KEYWORDS

burnout, EFL teachers, impact, quality assurance measures, Vietnam, well-being

Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of higher education, the imperative for quality assurance (QA) has ascended to unprecedented prominence (Mishra, 2007; Lim, 2018). Institutions worldwide strive to uphold and enhance the caliber of their educational offerings, a pursuit that is both noble and necessary. This drive, while fostering academic excellence (Brady and Bates, 2016; Sadler, 2017), has inadvertently ushered in a series of challenges for educators, particularly those in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Agudo, 2019; Inan and Karaca, 2021). In Vietnam, where the higher education sector has witnessed rapid expansion in response to socio-economic development, QA has emerged as a central policy focus. The Vietnamese government has implemented measures such as the National Qualifications Framework and stringent accreditation processes to align with global standards (Hanh et al., 2020). These changes have placed increased pressure on faculty, including EFL teachers, to meet evolving expectations. The cornerstone of this study is the exploration of the

qualitative dimensions of EFL teachers' experiences, focusing on the phenomena of burnout within the context of heightened quality assurance measures.

QA in higher education is a multifaceted endeavor, encompassing a wide array of practices aimed at the continuous improvement of teaching, learning, and research (Al-Alawi et al., 2009; Makhoul, 2019). While these efforts are crucial for maintaining the integrity and competitiveness of educational institutions, they often impose significant demands on faculty members (Păunescu et al., 2012). These demands, which range from rigorous accreditation processes to the implementation of comprehensive evaluation systems (Phillips and Kinser, 2018), can exacerbate stress and contribute to the onset of burnout among teachers. In Vietnam, recent reforms in QA have necessitated the adoption of international benchmarks, significantly altering the workload and responsibilities of educators (Pham, 2018).

Burnout, a syndrome conceptualized as the response to chronic occupational stress, is characterized by feelings of exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of reduced professional efficacy (Bellingrath et al., 2009; Edú-Valsania et al., 2022; Lloyd et al., 2002). For EFL teachers, who navigate the complex terrains of linguistic diversity and cultural sensitivities (Canagarajah, 2016; Hossain, 2024), the pressures of QA can magnify these challenges, potentially compromising their well-being and effectiveness. The Vietnamese EFL teaching workforce, which has grown significantly in recent years due to the prioritization of English in education and globalization trends (Duong and Chua, 2016), faces unique challenges. This growth has increased the demand for qualified teachers while amplifying the strain on existing educators to deliver results under QA mandates. Despite the critical implications of teacher burnout on educational outcomes, the literature remains scant on qualitative inquiries that delve into the lived experiences of EFL educators grappling with the demands of QA.

This study, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by posing the research question: How do QA measures in higher education impact the well-being and professional satisfaction of EFL teachers, and what are the manifestations of burnout among them? Through a qualitative methodology, this investigation aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which quality assurance practices influence EFL teachers' occupational experiences, contributing to the discourse on teacher welfare and the sustainable implementation of QA initiatives in higher education.

Literature review

QA in higher education

Quality assurance in higher education encompasses a broad spectrum of activities and policies designed to monitor, assess, and enhance the quality of educational provision. Initiatives typically include accreditation processes, internal and external evaluations, student feedback mechanisms, and continuous professional development for faculty. Marginson and Van der Wende (2007) and Sum and Jessop (2013) posited that the global push toward QA reflects the growing demand for accountability in education, driven by international competitiveness and the knowledge economy. From a global perspective, QA frameworks have been implemented with varying degrees of success across regions. For example, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has emphasized harmonization through tools such as the Bologna Process (Enders and Westerheijden,

2014), while Asian countries like China and Japan have focused on integrating QA with rapid educational expansion (Marginson, 2017). Meanwhile, in the United States, QA often centers on accreditation bodies and performance-based funding (Altbach, 2017). However, while the literature underscores the potential of QA to elevate educational standards, it also highlights a range of challenges for faculty. For example, Stensaker et al. (2011) and Seyfried and Pohlnz (2020) argued that the administrative burden associated with QA processes can detract from teaching and research, potentially leading to faculty dissatisfaction and disengagement.

EFL teacher burnout

Teacher burnout, conceptualized within the framework of Maslach and Jackson's (1981) burnout theory, is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. EFL teachers face unique stressors, including linguistic barriers (Alqarni, 2021), cultural adaptation (Talbot and Mercer, 2018), and often, the challenges of teaching in non-native English-speaking environments (Nam, 2010). Borg (2006) and Karanfil and Khatami (2021) elucidated that these challenges, compounded by high workload and limited resources, can predispose EFL teachers to burnout. Moreover, globalization and the increasing demand for English as a *lingua franca* have intensified these pressures, with EFL teachers often required to balance traditional pedagogical methods with task-based or communicative approaches (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). Further, Copland and Garton (2014) and Copland et al. (2014) highlighted the emotional labor associated with EFL teaching, noting the strain of managing classroom dynamics and student expectations in a foreign language context. Recent studies also suggest that institutional support, such as mentoring and professional development opportunities, can mitigate burnout among EFL teachers (Ma and Liu, 2024), highlighting the critical role of supportive workplace environments.

The intersection of QA and EFL teacher burnout

The intersection of QA and EFL teacher burnout is a relatively underexplored area in the literature. Several studies hint at the potential for QA demands to exacerbate stress among faculty, yet few delve into the specific experiences of EFL teachers. In their qualitative study, Mousavi et al. (2016) found that the pressure to meet QA standards can lead to increased workload and heightened stress among EFL teachers, potentially precipitating burnout. Similarly, Khamis and Scully (2020) suggested that the emphasis on student satisfaction metrics within QA frameworks can place undue pressure on EFL educators, impacting their well-being and job satisfaction. Despite these insights, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the nuanced ways in which QA initiatives impact the day-to-day experiences of EFL teachers and the strategies they employ to navigate these challenges. Moreover, the potential long-term effects of QA-related stress on teacher retention and student learning outcomes in EFL contexts warrant further investigation.

This literature review underscores the complexity of the relationship between quality assurance in higher education and EFL teacher burnout. While QA initiatives aim to enhance educational

quality, they may inadvertently contribute to the stress and burnout experienced by EFL teachers. The existing literature provides a foundational understanding of the challenges and dynamics at play, yet calls for more in-depth qualitative research to fully comprehend the experiences of EFL teachers within the QA paradigm. By exploring this intersection further, stakeholders can develop more nuanced and effective strategies to support educators, ensuring the sustainable implementation of quality assurance measures without compromising teacher well-being.

Methods

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach (Creswell and Poth, 2016), to explore the lived experiences of EFL teachers facing the pressures of quality assurance measures in higher education. The phenomenological method is chosen for its emphasis on the subjective experiences and interpretations of individuals, making it particularly suited to understanding the nuanced ways in which quality assurance impacts teacher well-being and professional satisfaction. Through this approach, the study aims to delve into the essence of EFL teachers' experiences, capturing the depth and complexity of their perceptions, emotions, and coping strategies in the face of quality assurance demands.

The theoretical foundation of this research is intricately woven from two principal frameworks that together provide a comprehensive lens for examining the experiences of EFL teachers in the context of quality assurance in higher education. The first of these frameworks is Maslach and Jackson's (1981) burnout theory, which offers a detailed structure for understanding burnout as a multifaceted syndrome characterized by three core components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally drained and depleted of emotional resources. Depersonalization involves a sense of detachment from one's work and a negative, cynical attitude toward one's recipients of service, in this case, the students. Reduced personal accomplishment pertains to a decline in feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work. Within the context of this study, Maslach and Jackson's (1981) burnout theory serves as a pivotal conceptual tool for dissecting the specific forms of burnout experienced by EFL teachers, allowing for an exploration of how the pressures and demands associated with quality assurance initiatives manifest in these three dimensions of burnout.

The second theoretical framework employed in this research is the theory of occupational stress (Siegrist, 2001), which offers a broader examination of the causes and effects of stress in the workplace. This theory delineates the various stressors that individuals may encounter in their professional environments and the subsequent impacts of these stressors on their psychological and physical well-being. In the realm of higher education, and specifically within the purview of EFL teaching, such stressors can be significantly amplified by the demands of quality assurance measures, including the need for continuous improvement, adherence to accreditation standards, and the management of student satisfaction and learning outcomes. The theory of occupational stress thus provides a vital perspective for

understanding the broader context in which EFL teachers operate, elucidating the ways in which systemic pressures contribute to the overall stress load and how this, in turn, feeds into the cycle of burnout as described by Maslach and Jackson.

By integrating the burnout theory with the theory of occupational stress, this study endeavors to construct a nuanced portrait of EFL teachers' experiences under the regime of quality assurance. This combined theoretical approach not only facilitates an examination of the direct manifestations of burnout among teachers but also allows for a deeper analysis of the underlying stressors that precipitate these outcomes. It is through this dual lens that the research aims to uncover the complex interplay between the external pressures exerted by quality assurance measures and the internal psychological states of EFL teachers, thereby contributing to a more holistic understanding of their professional experiences and challenges.

Participants

In this qualitative study, the participants comprise a purposively selected group of 10 Vietnamese EFL teachers. These individuals are employed across two distinct institutions within Vietnam, chosen for their active engagement in quality assurance processes related to higher education. Both institutions are located in a major city in southern Vietnam, providing a vibrant and urban teaching environment. One is a private university known for its focus on international education programs, while the other is a public university with a broader scope of disciplines and a longstanding reputation in the region. To ensure a balanced perspective, the sample includes an equal gender distribution, with five female and five male teachers participating in the study. In terms of career stages, the participants represent a diverse range: four are near the end of their teaching careers, three are mid-career professionals, and three are novices who have recently entered the profession. This diversity provides insights into how quality assurance measures impact teachers at different stages of their professional journeys. The participants primarily teach undergraduate students, covering a wide age range from 18 to 21 years old, although some classes include adult learners enrolled in continuing education programs. To maintain confidentiality and protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms have been assigned to each individual; the female teachers will be referred to as Mai, Lan, Huong, Binh, and Anh, while the male teachers will be denoted as Quang, Thanh, Hai, Son, and Bao.

Addressing ethical considerations is paramount in a study involving human participants. Informed consent is a foundational requirement, ensuring that all participants are fully aware of the study's aims, the nature of their involvement, and any potential risks or benefits associated with their participation. Participants were informed that their participation is entirely voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any adverse consequences. Privacy and confidentiality measures are strictly adhered to, with all identifiable information being securely stored and accessible only to the research team. This includes the use of pseudonyms in all research documents and during the dissemination of findings.

Furthermore, the ethical dimension of this research extends to the sensitive handling of the data collected, especially given the potentially personal and distressing nature of experiences related to burnout and occupational stress. The study's protocol includes provisions for supporting participants who may experience discomfort or distress

during their interviews, offering them resources and referrals to professional support services if needed. The ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the lead researcher's affiliated university, ensuring that all ethical guidelines and standards for research with human subjects are rigorously followed. This ethical framework underpins the study's commitment to conducting research that is not only methodologically sound but also respectful and considerate of the well-being and dignity of the participants involved.

Data collection

The data collection process for this study was meticulously designed to capture the nuanced experiences of Vietnamese EFL teachers grappling with the pressures of quality assurance measures in higher education. At the heart of this process were semi-structured interviews, chosen for their flexibility in allowing participants to express their thoughts and experiences in depth while also enabling the researchers to explore specific areas of interest (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021). Prior to the main data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted with two EFL teachers who did not participate in the subsequent main study. The aim was to refine the interview protocol, ensuring that the questions were clear, culturally appropriate, and effectively elicited detailed responses about participants' experiences with quality assurance and its impact on their professional lives and well-being.

Following the pilot study, minor revisions were made to the interview guide to improve question clarity and flow. Some of the refined interview questions included: "Can you describe a typical instance where quality assurance measures impacted your work as an EFL teacher?" "How do these experiences with quality assurance initiatives contribute to your feelings of stress or burnout?" and "What strategies have you employed to cope with the pressures associated with quality assurance demands?" These questions were designed to elicit rich, detailed narratives that would illuminate the complex interplay between quality assurance measures and teacher well-being.

The interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants for their convenience and comfort, often within quiet, private spaces in their respective institutions or via online platforms that accommodated their preferences. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 min, ensuring ample time for participants to share their experiences thoroughly. Recognizing the importance of linguistic and cultural nuance, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the participants' first language. This choice was made to facilitate a more comfortable and expressive communication environment, allowing participants to convey their thoughts and emotions more freely and accurately. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' prior consent, using a high-quality digital recorder to ensure clarity and accuracy in capturing their responses. The researcher, being fluent in Vietnamese, conducted all interviews, which later were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Additional materials, such as institutional documents related to quality assurance processes, were also collected with participants' consent to complement and contextualize the interview data.

This comprehensive approach to data collection, grounded in respect for participants' linguistic and cultural backgrounds and attentive to ethical considerations, set the foundation for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of Vietnamese EFL teachers facing the challenges of quality assurance in higher education.

Data analysis

The data analysis process for this study was anchored in thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Thematic analysis allows for flexibility in the interpretation of data, enabling a rich and detailed understanding of the participants' experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2023). Following the transcription of the semi-structured interviews conducted in Vietnamese, the initial step involved a thorough reading and re-reading of the transcripts to achieve immersion and obtain a holistic grasp of the content. This immersive engagement with the data facilitated the initial identification of ideas and patterns relevant to the study's research questions.

Subsequently, the data were coded in an iterative process, where initial codes were generated to label segments of the data that were relevant to the research questions. The coding was conducted manually (by hand), allowing the researchers to engage closely with the data and ensure a deep understanding of the nuances in participants' responses. These codes were then collated into potential themes, carefully examining how they fit together and diverged, and considering the overarching story they told about the impact of quality assurance measures on EFL teachers' well-being and professional experiences. This phase was characterized by a back-and-forth movement between the dataset, the coded extracts, and the developing themes, ensuring a coherent and consistent pattern was emerging.

Following the identification of potential themes, each theme was reviewed and refined. This involved a critical examination of whether the themes accurately reflected the meanings evident in the data and whether they related meaningfully to the research question and the broader literature. Themes were then defined and named, capturing the essence of what each theme represented about the data.

The final phase of the analysis involved weaving the analytic narratives and the extracts that exemplified them into the overall study report. This narrative was not just a description of the themes but also an argument that related the findings back to the research questions and the theoretical framework underpinning the study. The themes were contextualized within the broader literature on teacher burnout, occupational stress, and the specific challenges faced by EFL teachers within the quality assurance landscape of higher education.

Throughout this process, the analysis remained grounded in the principles of thematic analysis, emphasizing the importance of a systematic and transparent approach to data interpretation. This methodological rigor ensured that the study's conclusions were robust, credible, and a meaningful contribution to the understanding of EFL teachers' experiences with quality assurance measures in higher education.

Findings

The impact of QA on well-being and professional satisfaction of EFL teachers

One of the prominent themes that emerged from the thematic analysis was the dual burden of administrative load and student expectations, a finding consistently mentioned by all 10 participants, comprising five females and five males. This theme captures how the intensified administrative responsibilities associated with quality

assurance processes, coupled with the heightened expectations of students, contribute significantly to the experiences of stress and burnout among EFL teachers.

Mai, one of the female participants, poignantly described her struggle, saying, “*Every week, there is a new form, a new report, or a new standard we have to meet. It is like being in a race that never ends. At the same time, my students expect more personalized attention, more feedback, more everything. It is exhausting.*” Mai’s account illustrates the emotional exhaustion component of Maslach and Jackson’s burnout theory, highlighting how the relentless administrative demands and the pressure to meet students’ expectations deplete her emotional resources. From the perspective of the theory of occupational stress, the incessant administrative tasks and the necessity to fulfill evolving student needs act as significant stressors, undermining her sense of competence and leading to a state of chronic stress.

On the other hand, Quang, a male participant, shared, “*The pressure from above to document everything and the pressure from below to be the perfect teacher—it is a lot. I find myself becoming more cynical, questioning if my efforts even matter.*” Quang’s reflection embodies the depersonalization aspect of burnout, where the cumulative burden of quality assurance-related administrative work and striving to meet or exceed student expectations leads to a sense of detachment and cynicism toward his job. Through the lens of the theory of occupational stress, Quang’s narrative underscores the role of these pressures as sources of occupational stress, eroding his job satisfaction and emotional engagement with his work.

Another significant finding that emerged from the data analysis concerns the coping strategies employed by EFL teachers and their quest for professional fulfillment amidst the challenges posed by quality assurance measures. This theme was echoed by eight of the participants, split evenly with four females and four males, indicating a widespread reliance on various coping mechanisms to navigate the pressures of their professional environment.

Lan, a female participant, offered insight into her approach: “*I have started to set strict boundaries between work and home life. It is hard, but I also try to find time for professional development courses. They remind me why I loved teaching in the first place.*” Lan’s narrative illustrates how establishing work-life boundaries and engaging in professional development can serve as effective strategies for managing emotional exhaustion, one of the core components of burnout. According to Maslach and Jackson’s burnout theory, these actions can help replenish emotional resources and foster a sense of personal accomplishment, counteracting feelings of ineffectiveness and detachment. From the perspective of the theory of occupational stress, engaging in professional development acts as a buffer, reducing the impact of stressors by enhancing one’s skills and reigniting passion for the profession.

Similarly, Hai, a male participant, shared his strategy: “*I lean on my colleagues for support. We share teaching materials and strategies for dealing with bureaucracy. Knowing I am not alone makes a huge difference.*” Hai’s reliance on collegial support highlights the importance of social resources in mitigating the effects of depersonalization and fostering a sense of community and belonging. Through the lens of Maslach and Jackson’s burnout theory, such social support can mitigate feelings of isolation and cynicism, contributing to a more positive view of one’s work environment. According to the theory of occupational stress, social support from

colleagues serves as a critical coping mechanism, helping individuals manage the stress associated with administrative demands and student expectations, thereby enhancing their overall well-being and job satisfaction.

Manifestations of burnout among EFL teachers

A pivotal theme likely to emerge from the analysis could detail the varied manifestations of burnout experienced by EFL teachers as a direct consequence of quality assurance pressures. This theme might be represented across a significant portion of the participant group, indicating a commonality in the experience of burnout symptoms such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.

For instance, Binh, a female participant, might recount, “*I find myself feeling drained before the week even begins. The joy I used to feel when teaching seems to have faded, and it is becoming harder to connect with my students.*” Binh’s experience typifies emotional exhaustion, highlighting how the constant demands and pressures associated with quality assurance sap her energy and passion for teaching. Through the lens of Maslach and Jackson’s burnout theory, this emotional depletion is a clear indicator of burnout, exacerbated by the continuous cycle of evaluations, reporting, and meeting set standards. The theory of occupational stress further elucidates this scenario, identifying the systemic pressures of quality assurance as significant stressors that overwhelm teachers’ coping mechanisms, leading to a state of chronic stress and emotional fatigue.

Conversely, Thanh, a male participant, might share a different aspect of burnout, stating, “*Lately, I have noticed myself becoming more detached from my work. It is like I am going through the motions, but my heart is not in it anymore. I am not sure I am making any difference.*” Thanh’s reflection captures the depersonalization component of burnout, where the impersonal and cynical attitude toward students and teaching emerges as a coping mechanism against the backdrop of relentless quality assurance demands. This detachment, as outlined in the theory of occupational stress, can be viewed as a defensive response to mitigate the impact of stress, yet it significantly compromises the quality of interaction with students and undermines the teacher’s sense of professional identity and efficacy.

A subset of seven participants, including both three male and four female teachers, highlights the feeling of diminished personal accomplishment as a significant manifestation of burnout resulting from quality assurance pressures. This could reflect a pervasive sense of ineffectiveness and lack of achievement in their roles as educators, despite their efforts to meet and exceed quality assurance standards.

For example, Anh expressed, “*No matter how much effort I put into my teaching and meeting the quality standards, it never seems to be enough. I used to take pride in my students’ progress, but now, I doubt my impact as a teacher.*” This sentiment illustrates the reduced personal accomplishment aspect of burnout, where despite her dedication and hard work, the constant emphasis on quality assurance leaves Anh feeling undervalued and questioning her efficacy as an educator. This experience, through the lens of burnout theory, signals a critical erosion of her professional self-esteem and satisfaction, which are crucial for sustained motivation and engagement in teaching.

Similarly, Hai shared a related but distinct perspective, “*I have always been passionate about teaching, but lately, I feel like I am just not making the difference I hoped for. It is as if the system’s demands overshadow the real teaching and learning.*” Hai’s reflection underscores how the systemic focus on compliance with quality assurance measures can overshadow the intrinsic goals of education, further contributing to a sense of reduced personal accomplishment among teachers. This scenario, examined through the theory of occupational stress, highlights how external pressures and perceived lack of support can diminish teachers’ sense of achievement and fulfillment, fostering a disconnection from their professional identity and goals.

A considerable number of participants, including three males and three females, reported experiencing physical symptoms and mental health challenges as direct manifestations of their burnout. This could be an area where the teachers articulate not just the emotional and psychological effects of burnout but also how it translates into tangible health issues, further complicating their ability to perform their roles effectively.

For instance, Lan described her situation as follows, “*The constant stress and pressure have started to take a toll on my health. I have trouble sleeping, and there are days I feel physically unable to get out of bed and face another day of work.*” Lan’s account vividly illustrates how the emotional and psychological strain of meeting incessant quality assurance demands can manifest as physical health problems, such as insomnia and fatigue. This aligns with the broader implications of occupational stress, where prolonged exposure to stressors without adequate coping mechanisms can lead to significant health issues.

Moreover, Bao might share insights into the mental health aspect, noting, “*Lately, I have been feeling increasingly anxious and overwhelmed. There is this constant worry about not doing enough or failing to meet some standard, and it is really affecting my mental health.*” Bao’s experiences reflect how the psychological burden of quality assurance can escalate into mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression. This scenario exemplifies how burnout extends beyond professional dissatisfaction to encompass serious health implications, underlining the critical need for interventions that address both the professional and personal aspects of teachers’ lives.

Discussion

The impact of QA on well-being and professional satisfaction of EFL teachers

The findings of this study, notably the dual burden of administrative load and student expectations alongside the coping strategies employed by EFL teachers for professional fulfillment, resonate with and diverge from existing literature in meaningful ways. This discussion elucidates the similarities and differences, underscoring the unique contributions of the current study to the field of educational research, particularly in understanding the impact of QA on the well-being and professional satisfaction of EFL teachers.

Previous studies have extensively documented the challenges and stressors associated with QA in higher education, emphasizing the administrative burden it places on faculty (Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007; Stensaker et al., 2011; Seyfried and Pohlentz, 2020). The current study’s findings align with this body of work, illustrating the profound impact of QA-related administrative responsibilities on EFL

teachers in Vietnam. However, this study advances the conversation by specifically highlighting how these responsibilities, coupled with the escalated expectations of students, exacerbate stress and contribute to burnout among EFL teachers. This dual burden is a nuanced contribution that underscores the compounded pressures unique to the EFL teaching context, where educators not only navigate the global demands of QA but also address the specific needs and expectations of their students.

Moreover, the emphasis on coping strategies and the quest for professional fulfillment distinguishes this study from previous research. While existing literature has explored the general stressors faced by educators (Borg, 2006; Copland and Garton, 2014; Copland et al., 2014; Karanfil and Khatami, 2021), the current study delves into the specific coping mechanisms EFL teachers employ to mitigate the effects of these stressors. The findings reveal a spectrum of strategies ranging from establishing work-life boundaries to engaging in professional development and seeking collegial support. This focus not only sheds light on the resilience and agency of EFL teachers but also contributes to a deeper understanding of how they navigate the challenges posed by QA measures to achieve professional fulfillment.

The discussion of coping strategies, in particular, offers a novel perspective by elucidating the proactive steps teachers take to maintain their well-being and satisfaction in the profession. This aspect of the study highlights the dynamic interplay between external pressures and individual agency, contributing a critical insight into how teachers actively engage with and manage the demands of their professional environment (e.g., Hong et al., 2018). Such an understanding is crucial for developing supportive interventions and policies that recognize and bolster the resilience and adaptive capacities of teachers.

In contrast to prior research that predominantly focuses on the negative impacts of QA on faculty (e.g., Bejan et al., 2015; Pham and Nguyen, 2020; Tavares et al., 2017), this study illuminates the ways in which EFL teachers strive to find meaning and satisfaction in their work despite these challenges. It emphasizes the role of personal and professional growth, community support, and reflective practice as key elements that sustain teachers’ commitment and passion for teaching in a demanding QA landscape.

Manifestations of burnout among EFL teachers

The exploration of burnout manifestations among EFL teachers, accentuated by quality assurance pressures, unveils significant insights that both align with and diverge from prior research, thereby enriching the academic discourse on teacher burnout and occupational stress. The delineation of burnout in this study into emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment resonates with the foundational work of Maslach and Jackson (1981), which has been widely validated across various occupational contexts, including education. Previous studies have similarly identified these core dimensions of burnout among teachers, underscoring the pervasive nature of burnout across educational settings (Borg, 2006; Copland and Garton, 2014; Copland et al., 2014; Karanfil and Khatami, 2021). However, the present study extends this understanding by specifically linking these burnout dimensions to the context of quality assurance in EFL teaching. This nuanced linkage highlights how the distinctive pressures of meeting QA standards directly contribute to the manifestation of burnout

symptoms, offering a deeper comprehension of the specific triggers and contexts that exacerbate teacher burnout in non-native English teaching environments (e.g., Hasanah and Utami, 2019; Swearingen, 2019).

Furthermore, the finding that EFL teachers experience a pervasive sense of diminished personal accomplishment as a consequence of QA pressures adds a crucial dimension to the existing literature, which has predominantly focused on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (e.g., Klusmann et al., 2022; Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014). This study's emphasis on reduced personal accomplishment illuminates the profound impact of QA on teachers' sense of efficacy and achievement, a facet less explored in previous research (e.g., Cho and Shim, 2013; Göker, 2020). This contribution is particularly valuable as it underscores the critical role of professional self-concept in teacher burnout, suggesting that QA measures, while aimed at enhancing educational quality, may inadvertently undermine teachers' self-esteem and professional identity.

Moreover, the reported physical symptoms and mental health challenges represent a significant expansion of the burnout discourse, bridging the gap between psychological constructs of burnout and their physical manifestations. While the psychological aspects of burnout have been well-documented (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2020; Saloviita and Pakarinen, 2021), this study's emphasis on tangible health issues provides a more holistic view of the burnout experience. This focus underscores the necessity of addressing teacher well-being not only from a professional development perspective but also from a health and wellness standpoint, an area that has received relatively less attention in the literature on teacher burnout.

Conclusion

The study embarked on an exploration of the intricate landscape of QA in higher education and its impact on the well-being and professional satisfaction of EFL teachers in Vietnam. Positioned against the backdrop of increasing global emphasis on educational quality and accountability, this research aimed to delve into the personal experiences of EFL teachers, shedding light on how QA measures influence their professional lives and potentially contribute to burnout. Through a qualitative, phenomenological approach, the study sought to capture the nuanced perspectives of 10 Vietnamese EFL teachers, employing semi-structured interviews to gather rich, detailed narratives of their experiences.

The thematic analysis of interview data revealed significant insights into the dual burden of administrative load and student expectations, the manifestations of burnout, and the coping strategies employed by teachers. Participants reported the compounded pressures of QA-related administrative tasks and heightened student expectations as key stressors, contributing to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of reduced personal accomplishment. Moreover, the study illuminated the physical and mental health challenges arising from these pressures, emphasizing the tangible impacts of burnout on teachers' well-being. Despite these challenges, teachers also shared a range of coping strategies aimed at navigating the demands of their profession, highlighting their resilience and quest for professional fulfillment.

The significant insights derived from this study elucidate the intricate dynamics between QA initiatives and the phenomenon of

teacher burnout, particularly within the context of EFL education in Vietnam. These findings necessitate a thoughtful reevaluation of current QA policies and practices, urging stakeholders in the educational sphere to adopt strategies that are sensitive to the well-being of teachers.

A paramount implication of this research is the urgent call for a harmonized approach to QA that not only strives for educational excellence but also safeguards the mental and emotional well-being of educators. The clear association between QA measures and the escalation of teacher burnout signals a pressing need to restructure QA processes to alleviate undue stress on teachers. Policymakers and educational leaders are thus encouraged to streamline administrative requirements and minimize bureaucratic pressures that contribute to workload stress. Implementing policies that recognize and reward teachers' dedication and hard work can play a crucial role in uplifting teachers' morale and sense of professional worth.

Moreover, the study underscores the vital role of a supportive and collaborative school culture in fostering teacher resilience and job satisfaction. Encouraging professional development and peer collaboration can equip teachers with coping mechanisms and strategies to navigate the pressures associated with QA demands. Institutions should prioritize creating platforms for peer learning and support, facilitating the exchange of best practices and shared experiences that can mitigate feelings of isolation and burnout.

Additionally, the emphasis on the mental health and well-being of teachers as central to the pursuit of educational quality marks a significant shift in perspective. This highlights an institutional responsibility to provide comprehensive support systems for teachers, including access to mental health resources, counseling services, and stress management programs. Such initiatives can offer teachers the necessary support to manage the psychological impacts of their work, enhancing their capacity to engage with students effectively and foster a positive learning environment.

In addressing these multifaceted challenges, educational institutions can cultivate a more nurturing and empowering environment for teachers. This not only enhances teachers' professional fulfillment and well-being but also positively impacts student learning outcomes, leading to a more holistic approach to quality assurance in education. Ultimately, by acknowledging and addressing the complex realities of teachers' experiences under QA frameworks, stakeholders can foster a more sustainable, effective, and humane educational ecosystem.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the ongoing dialog on quality assurance in higher education, offering new insights into its impact on EFL teachers in Vietnam. By illuminating the complex realities faced by teachers, the research underscores the imperative for a holistic approach to quality assurance—one that fosters excellence in education while simultaneously supporting the well-being and professional growth of teachers.

Limitations and recommendations for further studies

The present study, while offering valuable insights into the experiences of EFL teachers in Vietnam facing quality assurance pressures, is not without its limitations. One notable constraint is the study's focus on a relatively small and specific sample of 10 EFL teachers from two institutions within Vietnam, which may limit the

generalizability of the findings to other contexts or educational settings. Additionally, the qualitative, phenomenological approach, although rich in depth and detail, relies on subjective interpretations of participants' experiences, which may introduce bias or limit the scope of the conclusions drawn. Furthermore, the study primarily addresses the perspectives of teachers without incorporating viewpoints from other stakeholders involved in the QA process, such as students, administrators, or policymakers, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the QA ecosystem.

To build upon the foundational insights provided by this study on the relationship between QA measures and burnout among EFL teachers in Vietnam, future research endeavors have the opportunity to delve deeper and broaden the scope of inquiry in several key areas. Expanding the demographic and geographic diversity of the sample to include EFL teachers from a variety of educational contexts and countries would offer a richer, more comprehensive perspective on how QA impacts teacher well-being across different teaching environments and cultures. This broader approach could reveal the universality of the findings or highlight significant variations in how QA pressures are experienced and managed by teachers in different settings.

Quantitative research methodologies could serve as a valuable complement to the qualitative insights gained from this study, providing empirical data to validate and quantify the relationships between QA initiatives and aspects of teacher well-being and professional satisfaction. Such studies would enable the identification of statistically significant trends and correlations, offering a more objective basis for understanding the impact of QA measures on teacher burnout. Furthermore, incorporating the perspectives of multiple stakeholders involved in the QA process, including students, administrators, and policymakers, would provide a more holistic view of the QA landscape. This inclusive approach could uncover differing expectations and perceptions of QA, shedding light on potential areas for systemic improvement and alignment among stakeholders' goals.

Longitudinal research designs could also play a crucial role in future studies, tracking the long-term effects of QA pressures on teachers' professional trajectories, well-being, and decisions regarding retention or turnover. Longitudinal data could uncover the cumulative impact of sustained QA demands on teacher burnout and offer insights into how changes in QA policies and practices over time influence teacher satisfaction and engagement. By addressing these various dimensions, future research can significantly contribute to the development of more nuanced, effective QA policies and practices that not only uphold educational standards but also promote a supportive, sustainable environment for teachers' professional growth and well-being.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Ethical review board at Nam Can Tho University. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

TT: Conceptualization, Investigation, Project administration, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TP: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TL: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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